

## Khema Sumana Sutta

### The Discourse on Khema and Sumana

[The arhat has no notion of status]  
 (Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.49/3:358 f)  
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

#### Introduction

The theme of the Khema Sumana Sutta (A 6.49) is that the arhat has overcome conceit (*māna*), that is, he has no superiority conceit (*seyya,māna*), no equality conceit (*sadisa,māna*), and no inferiority conceit (*hīna,māna*). This fact is stated by Khema in a positive manner [§1a], while Sumana states it in a negative manner [§1b]. Yet both arhats, Khema and Sumana, although their words are semantically contradictory, are saying the same thing! This is a good example of how the liberating truth transcends conventional language.

A second important point concerns the Buddha's statement: **“Thus, bhikshus, do youths of family declare their direct knowledge (*aññā*): the goal is told but without alluding to a self [a soul].”**<sup>1</sup> [§2] Here the expression, “youths of family” (*kula,putta*),<sup>2</sup> refers to the fact that Khema and Sumana are young monks who come from good families. The point is that age is no barrier to awakening. **The Anāgata,-bhaya Sutta 2** (A 5.78) (given in brief in **the Samaya Sutta**, A 3:66) contains a beautiful reflection on the urgency of spiritual practice, even for one who is still young:

The monk reflects: “I am now young...but the time will come when old age will touch this body; then it would not be easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted (*phāsu*) even when I am old.”  
 (A 5.78 = 3:103)

The key sentence of the Sutta is clearly that **“the goal is told but without alluding to a self”** (*attho ca vutto attā ca anupanīto*). It is only the arhat who fully understands the true nature of not-self, that there is no abiding entity. With that understanding, the arhat also does not see others by way of categories, that is, he does not measure anyone or anything. He is free from conceit and complexes.

There is a deliberate play on the term *upanīta*, which is clearly an allusion to the brahminical rite of *upanīta*, where “a boy is brought near to a Guru and initiated into one of the twice-born classes (by investiture with the sacred thread or other ceremonies)” (SED). In **the Assalāyana Sutta** (M 93), the phrase, *eko ajjhāyako anupanīta* (“one is a reciter, initiated”) occurs in a brahminical context, where *anupanīta* means “uninitiated, not having received brahminical education.”<sup>3</sup> The point is that spiritual liberation is not a matter religious ritual, but one of personal effort.

<sup>1</sup> “The goal is told, but without any reference to the self,” *attho ca vutto attā ca anupanīto*. As in **Ājīvaka S** (A 3.72/1:216) = “You have spoken of (man’s) welfare, and self is not brought in question” (A:W 1:198); **Soṇa Koḷi-ṅgā Vatthu** (V 1:185) = “the goal is spoken of but the self is not obtruded” (V:H 4:235). Comy to **Ājīvaka S** (A 3.72) takes the phrase to mean, “You have given an answer to my question, but you do not say, ‘I myself have such virtues.’” (AA 2:331).

<sup>2</sup> “Youth of family,” *kula,putta*, alt trs “son of family, clansman, noble youth.” In **Vakkali S** (S 22.87.39/3:124) = SD 8.8 (qv), the Buddha refers to Vakkali posthumously as *kula,putta* instead of *bhikkhu*. Vakkali was probably in his early 20s. Pukkusāti is similarly referred to as *kula,putta* in **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140) = SD 4.17.3n. See also **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.8ab) = SD 9(7g). On other terms denoting “young,” see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.1) n on *gahapati,putta* = SD 4.1.

<sup>3</sup> M 93.16/2:154.

**2 “Who laughingly [lightly] declare their knowledge”**

The Khema Sumana Sutta (A 6.49) closes with this interesting statement highly relevant to our times of religious commercialism and spiritual materialism:

Yet there are some hollow persons here, I say, who laughingly [lightly] declare their knowledge, only to fall into remorse later.”

*Atha ca pana idh' ekacce mogha, purisā hasamānakā maññe aññaṃ vyākaronti, te pacchā vighātāṃ āpajjantī ti.* [§2] = V 1:185

Public speakers often use a clever trick to fend off an incriminating question or a question whose answer they are ignorant of—they use laughter or humour to draw the audience’s attention from the real issue.

**Ajahn Brahmavamso**, in a talk once reminisced thus:

I remember Krishnamurti, the teacher—I was quite interested in his teaching for a while. Later I heard a recording of one of his talks given in the New York Library. It was quite a famous talk. I’ve seen the audio cassette in public libraries. I was really interested in the talk and at the end there were a lot of stupid questions. Krishnamurti answered those questions reasonably well, but then someone asked a really good question, which was very deep and challenged much of what he had said. I was disgusted when the answer was, with a very condescending and superior voice, “Do I have to answer everything?” The audience laughed. But this poor man was ridiculed even though it was the best question of the session. Krishnamurti just skirted around it with humour, and I thought that was really wrong.

...there are so many teachers and gurus, monks and nuns and goodness knows whatever, floating around the world today; you should ask them difficult questions...and see if they answer with a sense of equanimity, with a sense of respect—not like a politician avoiding the issue but like someone who knows what they are talking about. If you know, you are not afraid of questions.... There is a huge danger in believing in charlatans. (2007:153)<sup>4</sup>

“Zen” speakers and cult gurus often skirt questions they are bored with, or find it unprofitable to do so, and are simply unable to answer (but not honest enough to admit it). Often someone with a serious issue or problem could honestly be seeking an answer, but the question is simply brushed away or the questioner is ridiculed. Concerned and compassionate teachers would either give a general reply or ask the questioner to see him (or a capable pupil) at a more suitable time so that the problem could be dealt more effectively.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Human rights in Buddhism” [Nollamara, Perth (Australia): Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre, 2000] in “Simply This Moment!” Perth: Bodhinyana Monastery, 2007:141-162. Also at [http://www.what-buddha-taught.net/Books4/-Simply\\_this\\_Moment/8.Human-Rights-in-Buddhism.pdf](http://www.what-buddha-taught.net/Books4/-Simply_this_Moment/8.Human-Rights-in-Buddhism.pdf) (p124).

<sup>5</sup> See **Anubaddha S** (S 47.3) = SD 24.6 Intro (2.7).

## The Discourse on Khema and Sumana

(A 6.49/3:358 f)

**1a** At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s Grove near Sāvattihī. Now at that time, the venerable Khema<sup>6</sup> and the venerable Sumana [359] dwelt in Blind Men’s Wood [Andha,vana],<sup>7</sup> near Sāvattihī.

Then the venerable Khema and the venerable Sumana approached the Blessed One, saluted him and then sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, **the venerable Khema** said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, any arhat, with mental influxes<sup>8</sup> destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what has to be done, laid down the burden, reached his goal, totally discarded the fetters of existence, liberated by final knowledge,<sup>9</sup> to him this does not arise:

‘There is one superior to me [better than I]      (*atthi me seyyo*),’  
 ‘There is one equal to me      (*atthi me sadiso*),’ or  
 ‘There is one inferior to me [worse than I]      (*atthi me hīno*).’

The venerable Khema said this. The Blessed One approved of it. Then the venerable Khema, knowing, “The Blessed One has shown me his approval,” rose from his seat, saluted the Blessed One and left, keeping the Buddha to his right.

**1b** Then, not long after the venerable Khema had left, **the venerable Sumana** said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, any arhat, with mental influxes destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what has to be done, laid down the burden, reached his goal, totally discarded the fetters of existence, liberated by final knowledge, to him this does not arise:

‘There is none superior to me [better than I]      (*n’atthi me seyyo*),’  
 ‘There is none equal to me      (*n’atthi me sadiso*),’ or  
 ‘There is none inferior to me [worse than I]      (*n’atthi me hīno*).’

The venerable Sumana said this. The Blessed One approved of it. Then the venerable Sumana, knowing, “The Blessed One has shown me his approval,” rose from his seat, saluted the Blessed One and left, keeping the Buddha to his right.

**2** Then, not long after the venerable Khema and the venerable Sumana had left, the Blessed One addressed the monks:

“Thus, bhikshus, do youths of family declare their direct knowledge (*aññā*): the goal is told but without alluding to a self.<sup>10</sup>

Yet there are some hollow persons here, I say, who laughingly [lightly] declare their knowledge, only to fall into remorse later.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This is the only place where Khema (a common name) is mentioned, and Comys are also silent on him. Two Sumanas are mentioned in **Thera,gāthā** (Tha 335-339, 435-440). Cf **Khemaka S** (S 22.89/2:126-132) on Khema-(ka) who lives at the Jujube Park (*badarik’ārāma*): SD 14.13.

<sup>7</sup> See Intro (1) above.

<sup>8</sup> “Mental influxes,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “inflow, outflow”) comes from *ā-savati*, meaning “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously tr as influxes, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 kinds of *āsava*: the influxes of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*oghā*) and “yokes” (*yogā*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these influxes is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

<sup>9</sup> *Arahaṃ khīṇ’āsavo vusitavā kata,karaṇīyo ohita,bhāro anuppatta,sad-attho parikkhīṇa,bhava,samyojano samma-d-aññā vimutto*. The word *sad-attho* may be resolved two ways: (1) *sa-d-attho*, “one own goal,” (2) *sant + attho*, “the sublime goal,” “the ideal”.

<sup>10</sup> “The goal is told and without any reference to a self,” *attho ca vutto attā ca anupanīto*. See Intro (1) & n.

They consider not themselves as better, nor as equal, nor as inferior:  
Living with birth destroyed, they lead the holy life.

— evaṃ —

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<sup>11</sup> *Atha ca pana idh' ekacce mogha, purisā hasamānakā maññe aññam vyākaronti, te pacchā vighātam āpajjantī ti.* As at V 1:185: see Intro (2).